

Erie Lake & The Knoll

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Wrangell-St. Elias National Park & Preserve



Access: By car via the McCarthy Road, then by foot. Located near Kennecott/McCarthy. This route can be accessed from Kennecott Mill Town, via the Root Glacier/Erie Mine Trail.

Distance: Approximately 9 miles one-way, 18 miles round-trip

Time: 2-3 days or more.

Maps: USGS Maps-McCarthy C-5, C-6, B-6 1:63,360;

Difficulty: Moderate to strenuous. Requires route finding and moderate trip-planning. First five miles are on a trail. Remainder is a route and very rugged. Hiking is primarily over large rocks and scree, or rocky glacial ice. It is difficult hiking down (and back up) the steep slope from the Root Glacier Trail to the glacier. Some steep hiking to an open tundra area (the knoll).



Highlights: Sweeping views, glaciers, Stairway Icefall, geology, Erie Lake. The “Knoll” is a large hill that provides spectacular views of the Stairway Icefall.

Route: From the Kennecott Visitor Center, walk through the Kennecott Mill Town north on the Root Glacier/Erie Mine Trail. About a half mile beyond the visitor center, the road will split. Stay straight. The trail will soon cross over Bonanza Creek and then wind its way through the lateral moraines of the Kennecott and Root Glaciers. After approximately 1 1/4 mile, the trail reaches the Root Glacier access trail that leads to the left. Stay straight on the main trail and continue past the access trail. (Primitive campsites, along with an outhouse and food lockers, are available in this area.)

In another 1/4 mile the trail will cross the dry outwash plain of Amazon Creek. Depending on recent rainfall or spring melt, Amazon Creek may be flowing above ground. The trail continues in and out of brush and along the top of the moraine, above the glacier, for another 2 miles.

Towards the end of the trail, you will need to hike down the lateral moraine to the Root Glacier. There is no trail - you will need to find a route. The Erie Mine bunkhouse will be visible high above on the hillside to the right of the trail. The safest route down the lateral moraine will be in this zone, and may be marked by large rock cairns. This route down is well before the cables to the Erie Mine tram line. If you reach the Erie Mine tram cables, you’ve gone too far. (The bunkhouse is not visible from the tram cables.) Not far past the tram cables, the trail is cut off by a very steep rock cliffs. It is very difficult and dangerous to try and climb down to access the glacier from here. If you reach the Erie Mine tram cables, it is best to backtrack a 1/2 mile or more to find a safer route down the steep cliff walls.

Once down along the glacier, below the steep ridge, follow the trough that has been formed between the glacier ice and the lateral moraine. It is rocky and uncomfortable hiking. Eventually the trough will open up onto the ice of Root Glacier. The ice is relatively flat and “dry” since the winter snow melts off by the end of May and crevasses are exposed. It is possible to hike without crampons in warm and sunny weather in boots with good traction. However, in cloudy or cold weather, the glacier becomes hard and very slippery, making crampons essential.

After about six miles, you will come to Erie Lake, which has been formed by the glacier. This lake is an example of a jokuloupp (glacial dammed lake) and you will find it to your right (east). This lake generally drains by late-June and has numerous large icebergs beached in the basin. There are some scenic areas suitable for camping near the lake, especially on the east side of the lake. To continue to the knoll, hike around Erie Lake on the ice several hundred yards to the left of the lake.

While staying on the glacier, head towards the “Knoll” on the east side of the glacier. As you look north towards the Stairway Ice fall, the Knoll is the large, grassy hill to the east. Route-find through the rock-covered portion of the glacier to reach the lateral moraine a couple of hundred yards to the right of a waterfall. Climb up the hillside in the meadow, staying to the right of the waterfall. It gets extremely brushy near the top of the waterfall. Once at the top of the waterfall, hike up the stream, watching for the trail on the left hand side of the water. The trail leads to an area suitable for camping on top of the “knoll,” elevation 3,800'. This is a beautiful spot which offers one of the best views of the Stairway Icefall.

Your route back is to retrace your steps. This is an excellent area to spend an extra day or two for exploring.

Hazards: Travel in this area should be done only by experienced parties who are able to read and follow a map and compass. This is a very remote area and the hiking is strenuous. Help is not readily available.

During the spring, creek levels can be low in the morning and impassable by late afternoon. Heavy rainstorms can quickly raise the water levels. Bears may be present in the area. Proper food storage is required. Bear Resistant Food Containers are available from park visitor centers.

Notes: Please call the Kennecott Visitor Center at (907) 554-1105 for assistance with trip-planning.

To hike to the Knoll and back in one day makes for an extremely long, strenuous day and is not recommended.

